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Citation for published version:

McClanahan, A 2013, 'Notes on Contemporary Art and Anthropology: Part I: Magic, Value, Games and Scams' *MAP: Journeys in Contemporary Art*, vol. n/a, no. n/a, pp. n/a.
<<http://mapmagazine.co.uk/9658/angela-mcclanahan/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

MAP: Journeys in Contemporary Art

Publisher Rights Statement:

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NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Part 1: Magic, Value, Gifts and Scams. An essay by Angela McClanahan

This is the first portion of a two-part essay relating to anthropology and contemporary art. It began life as one component of an act of cultural and economic exchange, and originally stems from a dialogue that was initiated between myself, an anthropologist teaching Visual Culture in an art college and Berlin-based artist Tobias Sternberg, following his participation in a curriculum entitled *Shift/Work*, a project that interrogated concepts of artistic labour and value, developed by Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) and the Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop (ESW) in 2011, which incorporated elements of his ongoing project *Temporary Art Repair Shop*.

We made a 'deal' relating to the dialogue we had been having about art and value since the *Shift/Work* project: in return for writing a critical essay on value, gifts and exchange for Tobias' recent exhibition at the Krupic Kersting Gallery in Cologne, I, in turn, received a sculpture made by the artist that he judged to be of equal value for my time, labour, and the creative investment that was embodied within it, as well as sharing a portion of the 'spotlight' and some legitimization of my own position as an anthropologist teaching and participating in the 'art world', by appearing as an author in the catalogue for an art exhibition. It was an act of reciprocal exchange; of creative mutuality, in which we both benefitted in a myriad of ways related to, for example, our professional status, our institutional 'worth', the social and cultural capital perceived to be attached to the 'networks' in which we both operate.

To describe this exchange in such formal, structural, 'market' terms may seem cynical. Though to ignore or deny the reality of any of this—no matter the affront it presents to my own anti-capitalist values—would be naïve at best, and at worst, to invoke a kind of false posturing about 'selling out' that in no way reflects the reality or complexity of current global politics and economics, and the way in which they underpin our everyday working lives. Of course this exchange *also* says a great deal about our mutual respect for one another's creative and intellectual work, the fact that we get along well socially, and that we more or less share and endorse similar points of view on art and the practices surrounding it. In frank terms, it was also pleasurable, good fun, in fact, to spend time thinking and writing about the particular works that are discussed in the paragraphs that follow. But, the central issue driving the project was that the artist required a catalogue containing critical essays to institutionally 'legitimate' his exhibition, and I believe his work to comment on and engage with contemporary conceptions of trade, objects, ethics, politics and art in one of the most sophisticated, playful and interesting ways of any practitioner I know. So, the trade went ahead.

What this essay, and the wider intentions of the spirit of creative exchange embodied within it sets out to do, then, is to demonstrate numerous ways in which cultural forms, in this case contemporary art, are *simultaneously* entangled in a number of spheres of meaning, value and mediation. It *activates* the ongoing dialogue about art, value and exchange that continues to unfold personally between us^[1], but also, hopefully in some small way, contributes to wider discourse on the discussion of labour, value and politics in art—a conversation that has taken on a renewed sense of urgency since the advent of the crisis of global capitalism in 2008. It of course raises more questions than answers (as per the usual disappointment and curse of critical academic analysis), but might also suggest that there are to be found, at least from my point of view, alternatives to the hegemony of the marketplace that *already exist* in some of what we do and how we relate to one another, especially where mutual aid is concerned, in the context of social, cultural and economic exchange that relate to art practice, the art market

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and so on.

The essay focuses primarily on Sternberg's *Temporary Art Repair Shop* project, an ongoing work relating to value and exchange that is described below, but also acknowledges that the wider elements of his practice are actively engaged with dialogues and ways of working that question the exchange, circulations and values that underpin contemporary art today. It also evokes anthropological ideas and themes about these subjects in terms of their applicability to analyse and understand Tobias' work, how and why that applicability itself adds to anthropological understanding of arenas like value, gifts and exchange more generally.

The Temporary Art Repair Shop

It is a fact that participating in the capitalist marketplace is not only the way in which people in both established and emerging 'global' economies are now forced to fulfill our everyday needs, but also that 'the market' is naturalised and reified within social relations in ways we don't necessarily always recognise or acknowledge. It is suffused and sublimated within creative production, our lexicon and gestures; even within the way in which our personhood is constituted^[iii]. The *Temporary Art Repair Shop*, like a good deal of Sternberg's most recent work, addresses many of these issues. It examines both overt and concealed cultural aspects of the economic order of the marketplace, using art as a way to explore and think through how art work and practices are valued, how they visually and materially *embody* those values, and the networks of meaning in which they are enmeshed. An excerpt from Sternberg's own description of the project reads:

The Temporary Art Repair Shop tries out a different economic model for public art. Tobias' work is free to the public handing in broken objects, but is paid for by the hosting art institution. The art institution gets public funding paid for by the general public, who can, if they choose to, take part in the game proposed and so become the private owners of sculptures. The only price they pay is their time and commitment, and indirectly by supporting culture through a very small part of their taxes. The art institution gets an audience, which is one of the requirements for being allocated public funding, which pays for the project. What does this mean for the value of the sculptures? Are they worth nothing, because they were given for free, or will they one day be worth a lot of money, because only those few lucky enough to be there when the project happened, and interested enough to take part, walked away with their own sculpture?

The introduction of Tobias' body of work to our curriculum at ECA was of particular interest to me. I developed a seminar for students about 'gift economies' that was designed to run alongside it, as my job as an anthropologist teaching at an art college, it seems to me, is to bring relevant histories, theories, contexts and dialogues from that discipline to bear on work that is produced that setting. And no element of contemporary art practice is more bound up with both classic and current anthropological thinking than value; the transformative (and alchemical, as we shall see below) power that lies in acts of exchange, elements of meaning and symbolism that seem so obvious and 'common sense' that their true significance is hidden, the complexities surrounding how evaluation of labour and 'value' in art work operates, and so on.

Indeed, anthropologists have played a central role in studying and gaining insight into the circulation of wealth in wildly varying economies of societies throughout the world. From the discipline's 19th century colonial beginnings, engagements with the subject of exchange by authors like Edward Tylor, James Frazer and Lewis Henry Morgan were based around the idea of *alterity*; of understanding how 'other', 'primitive' societies operated 'outside' of modernity. Early assumptions were that the kinds of exchange that characterised 'small scale' societies—barter, gift exchange, and so on—would always, with evolution, give way to more 'sophisticated' means of trade. In the 20th century, focus shifted to engaging with the ways in which trade and circulation produced value. Bronislaw Malinowski's long term study of the Kula ring, in which shell necklaces and armbands are traded amongst high ranking men in the Trobriand Islands as a form of producing and reifying power relations, transformed how we understand alternatives to non-monetary exchange, and Marcel Mauss's mid-century thesis on gift economies helped us to understand how they may function both as stand alone systems, as well as often being embedded within and incorporated into, other kinds

of economic structures. More recently, Marilyn Strathern's study of Melanesian gift exchange has helped us to understand how personhood is a malleable concept that is both implicated in, and created by, conceptions of individuality (tripartite views of people as constituted of a mind, body and spirit), or dividuality (persons as constituted from multiple essences and social relations, including the giving and receiving of gifts), as well as how gender is both studied and understood in the acts leading up to the performance of gift exchange. Finally, Arjun Appadurai has argued that 'things' have 'social lives' that can be studied in relation to the different spheres of use, value and exchange that they enter into and exit over their 'lifetimes'.

These studies have all contributed in substantial ways towards our understanding of the human capacity for unlimited modes of developing creative forms of exchange and economic systems. Some of the questions that can be posed in relation to contemporary art in light of some of these analyses include:

Who owns the labour that is embodied in the creative works we produce and exchange? Can our labour be detached from us as persons, and 'owned' by a gallery? The universities and colleges for which we teach? How might an artist benefit from their work being incorporated into a powerful institutional discourse that has the power to canonise and legitimate art, and how should we judge the 'value' of the time invested in its production? How did Sternberg calculate the value of the creative labour embodied in the sculptural work he is 'trading' for the writing of this essay? Are they equal? If we love our work, can it be judged as 'labour', and can we expect more or less financial return because of it?

All of these questions pervade our engagement with art practice and the 'art market'. However, it is some recent remarks by David Graeber and Michael Taussig on the nature of value and, crucially, *magic*, both generally in relation to global capitalism, and specifically in relation to art, that are most germane to this discussion.

Graeber has often proposed that anthropological understandings of diverse economic systems shouldn't be limited simply to *describing* what has occurred in human societies historically, or even in contemporary cultures that currently operate in some way against the hegemony of market capitalism. Rather, he argues that our task should be to *harness* those understandings as proof to ourselves that alternative systems of exchange can, and have, operated successfully throughout human history, and that capitalism, though seemingly engulfing and all pervasive, does not necessarily always have to be the only game in town. In other words, the diversity we find in studying economies of various kinds can stimulate our imaginations to formulate alternative future economies based on communal practices that already exist in how we relate to one another. He applies his anthropological understanding of economy, politics and magic to formulate an understanding of contemporary art in widely cited work on value and immaterial labour. More of which below.

Michael Taussig, an anthropologist with a long standing interest in the relationship between capitalism and the state, proposes that the project of statecraft and the neoliberal free market are both essentially forms of *modern magic*. I use some of his observations below in relation to Graeber's anthropological likening of politics and art to magic.

What I want to emphasise is that the *Temporary Art Repair Shop* plays and engages with many of the issues outlined above. I would now like to try and tease out a particular analysis about the nature of 'value' and exchange in art that, I think, anthropology is particularly equipped to posit, and that are relevant to the ways the *Shop* is designed to enact.

Art, Magic, Games and Scams

Tobias openly proclaims the *Temporary Art Repair Shop* to be a kind of game: an exercise that plays with perceptions and assumptions about money, art, value, time, worth, rights, networks, ownership and social relations. The 'deal', as described in his description of the project above, is that you turn your 'broken' item over to him, at which time he effectively acquires its ownership: it is his choice as to whether he will 'give it' back to you after its transformation. As such, the project begs the following questions:

Have you *really* been given a gift, as intimated in the 'rules' of the game, or did you actually pay for the item twice, once in the context of your initial transaction to acquire it as your own private property, and again, through your support of the arts organisation staging the project? Has a cycle of obligation been set up between you and the artist or the arts organisation, since you have apparently received something for 'free'? Does the artist retain 'copyright' over images of the object? Is what you owned still simply an item that has lost its functional utility, or has it taken on a new 'use' value in its commodified status and value as a work of art? Is all of this a trick, a joke or a scam? All of these simultaneously? If so, who is being duped, and who is reaping the rewards?

The particular aspect of Graeber's ethnographic work that I want to apply to Sternberg's *Shop* project lies in his observations about contemporary capitalism, the politics of this system, the contemporary art market's role in it, and how these might be compared with magic and trickery, as understood in classic anthropological analyses^[iii]. He writes that:

Politics is that dimension of social life in which things really do become true if enough people believe them. The problem is that in order to play the game effectively, one can never acknowledge its essence... Political power has to be constantly recreated by persuading others to recognise one's power; to do so, one pretty much invariably has to convince them that one's power has some basis other than their recognition. That basis may be almost anything—divine grace, character, genealogy, national destiny... In this sense politics is very similar to magic, which in most times and places—as I discovered in Madagascar—is simultaneously recognised as something that works because people believe that it works; but also, that only works because people do not believe it works only because people believe it works. For this is why magic, whether in ancient Thessaly or the contemporary Trobriand Islands, always seems to dwell in an uncertain territory somewhere between poetic expression and outright fraud. And of course the same can usually be said of politics. If so, for the art world to recognise itself as a form of politics is also to recognise itself as something both magical, and a confidence game—a kind of scam.

Central here is the argument that capitalist politics and economics, like all systems of belief, are largely based on principles of *faith*. If you are in possession of enough economic or political capital, claims you make about certain things can become true *because you say they are*. One of the reasons that we have been trained not to question the sheer incredulity of financier's enormous salaries is that we are mystified by what they do, *simply because they tell us its complexity is beyond our comprehension*. And most of us believe them. It is this *faith* then, that is the basis upon which a great deal of transactions—from the highest level market speculation, to the smallest exchange of money or credit to buy food—exist. Those practices become inscribed with meaning and are value, in our case, extending to artists; they are people that possess the power to transform objects into possessions of high value *if you believe in* their power, their rank in the art market, the 'value' of their name internationally, the power of affect.

On the other side of the coin to faith, as mentioned here, is, of course, the crucial presence of *skepticism* in the alchemical equation. Graeber insists that in order to be effective, magic necessarily also requires the revealing of the trick—a double, or even triple bluff, if you will—in the making and mediation of art.

Taussig, too, articulates a similar point in his discussion of how 'things', in our case, creative work and its distillation in particular objects like artwork or essays, derive value in the world of neoliberal capitalism. He remarks that 'value lies not in a source nor in exchange *per se*, but instead in the metamorphosis of the object or service exchanged.... Value lies in transformation. This metamorphosis has a bewilderingly magical nature to it. In fact Marx refers to the process.... as alchemical'^[iv].

For the world of art/politics, then, there is always a hint of transformation, subtle or explicit trickery, involved that drives the system as it currently stands. Graeber^[v] goes on to say that:

It is never clear, in this context, who exactly is scamming whom. Everyone—artists, dealers, critics, collectors alike—continue to pay lip service on the old

19th century Romantic conception that the value of a work of art emerges directly from the unique genius of some individual artist. But none of them really believe that's all, or even most, of what's actually going on. Many artists are deeply cynical about what they do. But even those who are the most idealistic can only feel they are pulling something off when they are able to create enclaves, however small, where they can experiment with forms of life, exchange, and production which are—if not downright communistic (which they often are), then at any rate, about as far from the forms ordinarily promoted by capital anyone can get to experience in a large urban centre—and to get capitalists to pay for it, directly or indirectly. Critics and dealers are aware, if often slightly uneasy with the fact, that the value of an artwork is to some degree their own creation; collectors, in turn, seem much less uneasy with the knowledge that in the end, it is their money that makes an object into art. Everyone is willing to play around with the dilemma, to incorporate it into the nature of art itself.

Crucial to all of this is a point made over and over in Graeber's work. This is that, far from being beyond our comprehension, *value is a source of our own—that is, human—creation*^[vi]. If there is some truth to all of this, that we are mystified by the modern magic that characterises the contemporary world of capitalist exchange and politics, and if we recognise, like Taussig and Graeber, that contemporary art is, in fact, akin to the world of politics, we should, by all accounts, be demanding how we can apply such analyses to the ways in which we are led to believe the claims of politicians, bankers, financiers, economists, and so forth. Are we all being scammed all of the time by the economic and political system under which we live, and if so, what can be done about it?

Art, value and exchange: a proposition

All components of 'art'—its production, distribution, consumption, affect, value—are enmeshed, just as any other cultural form or field, in *some form* of institutionalised exchange. This is true in relation to its engagement with large-scale state funded public galleries, small, 'grassroots' artist-run spaces, benefactors and patrons, art 'scenes', public/private partnership art organisations, colleges and universities, and so on. Any discussion of labour, value and art must therefore be premised on this acknowledgement. The questions raised by the *Temporary Art Repair Shop*, and in Sternberg's art practice more generally, *enact* this complexity, and in so doing, help us to question our assumptions about exchange and value, and to view them in myriad ways that make us think about ethics, social relationships, relationality, mutuality, the contexts in which objects can be transformed, and vice versa.

The value of this, and the ongoing dialogue between art and anthropology that deepens our understanding of these issues is that our understanding of them—especially the idea that the market and the political practices that drive it are rife with fraud, scams, and other forms of magical trickery—can be transposed to the way in which circulation, social relations, and exchange happen in our everyday lives. Sternberg's art and anthropological understandings of exposing the workings of circulation, magic and exchange then, provide models for us to decide whether there is potential within our transactions for transforming our society and economy into one based more on creative mutuality, shared intent, and, perhaps optimistically, creative thinking about future alternatives.

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Part 2 will appear in MAP September 2013

The original version of this essay was published in the catalogue *Tactile Narratives: The Sculptural Work of Tobias Sternberg*, 2013, Krupic Kersting Galerie, Cologne

[i] Tobias and I are continuing our discussion by writing letters to one another about value, art, magic, anthropology and exchange on his Temporary Art Repair Shop blog: http://artrepairshop.com/wordpress/?page_id=576.

[ii] Personhood, not to be confused with individual human beings, is a *legal concept* relating to an assumed status of a person being able to act upon the world through the possession of, amongst other things: the possession of private property, rights, privileges, responsibilities, forms of citizenship or subjecthood.

[iii] From Graeber, David 2011 *Revolutions in Reverse*. London and New York: Minor

Compositions, page 94.

[iv] From Taussig, Michael 1997 *The Magic of the State*. London: Routledge, page 139.

[v] Graeber as above, page 95.

[vi] From Graeber, David 2001 *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.

